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Editorial

THE FUTURE WORLD AND THE FUTURE OF THE WORLD

THE ESCHATOLOGY OF A MODERN THEOLOGIAN

In his recently published volume on *Biblical Dogmatics*, Professor Milton S. Terry, of the Garrett Biblical Institute, maintains that the second coming of Christ, the day of judgment, and the resurrection are all processes, not events; the two former at least being now, as they have been for centuries, in progress, and the last-named being a separate experience for each individual. The appearance of this teaching in a work on systematic theology, which as its title suggests is built pre-eminently, if not exclusively, on the Bible, is an interesting evidence of the influence of modern biblical study upon systematic theology. Professor Terry came to the chair of systematic theology from that of biblical theology, and to the chair of biblical theology from the Department of Exegesis. We may not all have followed his path or reached exactly his results in exegesis or in criticism, but thoroughgoing exegetical and historical study can hardly fail to bring one to his conclusions, so far as concerns the result for present-day Christian theology.

SURRENDERED ELEMENTS OF EARLY CHRISTIAN ESCHATOLOGY

In large circles of Christian thought, the old eschatology is gone, probably never to return. The apostle Paul looked for an appearance of Jesus in the clouds of heaven, and was not without hope in the early years of his missionary activity that this return might come within his own lifetime. The failure of his expectations to be realized in his day led naturally first to the simple postponement of that day, which Paul himself had said would so come as a thief in the night. It is a striking testimony to the persistent power of hope that down almost

to this very hour the Christian church has continued to look, as for an event that might come at any time, for such a return of Jesus on the clouds, and such an end of the world as the first age of the church thought to be even then near at hand. It has remained for the historical study of the nineteenth century to analyze the elements of that expectation, and to show how with the pure gold of faith in God and firm conviction that he would give victory to his people, there were—and under the circumstances must have been—mingled ingredients of a purely speculative and imaginative character, and that the latter form no integral part of the message of Christianity to men. For that message is not concerning times and seasons, not concerning elements melting with fervent heat, or a Christ descending in the clouds, speaking in audible trumpet tone to all who live upon the earth or sleep beneath it, but of a faith in a God who ever lives and loves and rules, and in a Christ who will more and more reign in the hearts of men and in the affairs of nations. It must be an ever-diminishing circle of Christians whose faith will find nourishment and inspiration in looking for the fulfilment in *their* day of the hopes which history has long since shown the early church to have mistakenly cherished. The most of the books that deal with the *Parousia* henceforth belong simply to the history of Christian thought, not to the literature of Christian faith.

THE FUTILITY OF MODERN SUBSTITUTES

Nor does it seem likely that there will arise to take the place of the old eschatology another of like order based either on the imagination of modern poets or on the results of psychic research. Is it only a generation since Bishop Bickersteth wrote *Yesterday, Today and Forever*, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps published *Gates Ajar*, and a religious public read both with avidity? Yet today how completely forgotten. The Society of Psychic Research has done valuable service, but perhaps none more valuable than by all its volumes of reports to deepen the conviction that not only between the good and the evil in the unseen world, but also between that world and us there is a great gulf fixed, and that we must walk by faith and not by sight. Eye hath not seen and ear hath not heard, nor hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive what the life of the emancipated soul shall be.

THE HOPE OF IMMORTALITY

But if we surrender the eschatological programme in which the early church clothed those hopes and expectations which did so much to give vitality and effectiveness to early Christianity, have we then bounded our thought by the hour of death, and must the church henceforth find its inspiration and its arguments wholly in the life that now is? Far be it. Three score years and ten is a long time and from the life that now is there may be drawn mighty inspiration to noble living, and powerful sanction for the imperatives of a lofty morality. But life would be distinctly poorer and the motives to noble living distinctly weaker if it were necessary to bound the horizon of our thought and our appeal by the cradle and the grave. Moreover, the hope of a blessed immortality for the righteous is something quite distinct from any eschatological programme. To have learned that the eschatological expectations of the New Testament saints were largely colored by the enthusiasm of Jewish apocalyptists, or to become convinced that there is nothing to be learned concerning the future life from ostensible communications of supposed spirits concerning the most trivial affairs of our present life, is not to dissolve into thin air the hope of immortality. The continuance after death of a life enough like the present life to be comprehensible to one who is in the midst of this life is probably beyond the possibility of scientific demonstration. But faith has its reasons, too, and the confidence that God's love to man is such that for all who will consent that it shall be so, the best is yet to come—this, which is the essence of the hope of immortality, Christian faith will not surrender. From the present period of acute criticism and reduction to lowest terms the confidence that death does not end all will, we are persuaded, rise again to assert itself with new power.

THE FUTURE OF THE WORLD AS A MOTIVE TO RIGHTEOUS LIVING

But it is not enough to say that we have not lost that which is essential. There is in the change of which we are speaking a real gain, richly compensating for any loss that may be involved in the surrender of a definite programme of the future and of a vivid expectation of a personal reappearance of the Lord. In the ancient history of Israel, vagueness of thought concerning the future world was accompanied

by a concern for the future of the present world, and a merging of one's own interest in the interest of one's posterity that has not always been present in the times when religious thought has been largely occupied with the future world and the blessedness it was to bring to the individual. But such devotion to the welfare of the race is simply devotion to the good of men, and this in turn is simply acceptance as the end of one's own living of that which Christian faith affirms to be the will of God for man. And such identification of one's own good with the will of God gives an assurance that all will be well with one's self, and has power to comfort the soul in adversity and steady it for life's tasks equal to if not even greater than that which is furnished by any expectation, however vivid, of an apocalyptic return of the Lord near or far. In our own day the extreme individualism that for a time held sway is giving place again to a sense of the larger self and of the solidarity of the family and the nation and the race. This is a triumph of the principles that are at the very center of the religion of Jesus. It was precisely this that he taught men to do, to count not their own lives dear to them if only they might be as wheat cast into the ground to die and bring forth much fruit for humanity. It is an opportune moment to urge the appeal which the future of the community and the race makes to thoughtful men.

THE POSITIVE GAIN OF THE NEW EMPHASIS

After all is it not a gain, if, no longer looking with eagerness or with trembling for a day of the Lord when the elements shall melt with fervent heat and the earth and the works that are therein shall be burned up, we set our hope on the good that is to come to the world through the spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the triumph of righteousness on the earth, as human society and institutions are more and more leavened with the truth of God? If we may legitimately appeal to men to choose the way of righteousness and goodness because of the result to themselves in a future world, do we not appeal to an even nobler motive when we ask them to live rightly that generations yet unborn may be blessed with the blessings of a kingdom of God on earth? And may it not be that to some at least this appeal to the nobler motive will be the stronger also? Can we doubt which of these two motives appealed the more strongly to Jesus Christ? Cer-

tainly it would not be wholly a loss, if the temper and tone of our age should compel us to transfer our emphasis from the warning cry to men to flee from the wrath to come and lay hold upon eternal life for themselves, to the appeal to them to cast their lives like seed into the ground that they may spring up and bear fruit in the well-being, physical, moral, and religious, of their fellow-men, both those now living and all those who, we know not for how many generations or centuries, shall live their lives here upon this earth. If there are two worlds that stretch away from this hour into the limitless future—the world that is beyond death and the future of the world that now is—the motives that can be drawn from the latter are not less powerful—are they not even more noble?—than those that can be drawn from the former. We need not be greatly disturbed if in the Providence of God we are being forced to appeal to the strongest motives, which are at the same time the noblest, that can move the human soul.